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## Reminisces with My Father, A Nautanki and Ramlila Master Artist

*Devendra Sharma*

*Pandit Ram Dayal Sharma (the author's father) is a nationally famous Nautanki artist, who has performed in theatre, including Ramlila and other North-Indian styles of theatre since the 1950s. He was born in the village of Samai, near Mathura in 1946. He is now based in both his village in the Braj region, and the capital Delhi. Pandit Sharma comes from a long line of actors and musicians in the Samai-Kherā gharānā (musical lineage or school). In the nineteenth century, his ancestors used to perform for Indian royalty, in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (1822–1887) in Awadh, and helped establish the Rahas form. Rahas, which is closely associated with its chief patron and participant, the Nawab of Awadh, involves singing, dancing, and play-acting stories about Lord Krishna and his beloveds. His father Pandit Khubiram Sharma (1919–1995) and uncle Pandit Ramswaroop Sharma (1928–1997), through their work in their dramatic troupe, played a prominent role in popularizing the Braj style of Nautanki and Swang in the Kanpur-Lucknow area.*

*By his late teens, Pandit Sharma was a major star in Nautanki, performing all over the Hindi-speaking regions of North India, in his family's company. Since then, he has directed and performed in Nautanki productions all over the world, and has also composed music for television and films, thus playing an important role in re-popularizing Nautanki in contemporary times. Beginning in 1968, All India Radio (AIR) invited him to record Nautankis, and he has continued to make recordings for AIR up to the present. His early recordings of Nautanki were among the earliest of such recordings, and used to be played regularly on the radio, at a time when AIR, a public station controlled by the government, preferred to play elite forms of music, especially Indian classical music. Also in the late 1960s, Pandit Sharma began performing with, and teaching Nautanki to new generations of actors at the prestigious National School of Drama in Delhi, and continues to do so. In the early 1990s, Pandit Sharma was invited to England to compose music for a theatrical production of Heer Ranjha. During its*

run, the BBC recorded a series of interviews with him on Nautanki. He was the first Nautanki artist to receive such international recognition for his work.

Although Pandit Sharma primarily works in Nautanki, he also has much experience with other forms of traditional theatre in North India, including Ramlila and Raslila. Pandit Sharma stills runs his Nautanki company, Braj Lok Madhuri, and performs in both villages and cities. During his long career, he has served as a consultant for the Indian government and non-profit organizations on best practices for using traditional theatre in social service campaigns. In 2015, the President of India awarded Pandit Sharma the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the nation's highest honor for performing artists, one that is rarely given to Nautanki artists. Even today, his performances sell out at major venues, and millions fondly call him "Braj Kokila" or "The Nightingale of Braj."

DEVENDRA SHARMA: Thank you, Pandit ji, for having a conversation with me about Ramlila and Nautanki. You are not only my father but also my guru. I grew up performing with you in both Ramlila and Nautanki, from the time I was around three years of age. Like your fans, I have always admired you as a great star, but I've also had the honor knowing you as a son, friend and fellow performer. Over the years, we've had many wonderful chats about the indigenous theatre traditions of India. So I wanted to take this opportunity now to interview you so you could share some of your knowledge and memories with the rest of the world, for the sake of future generations.

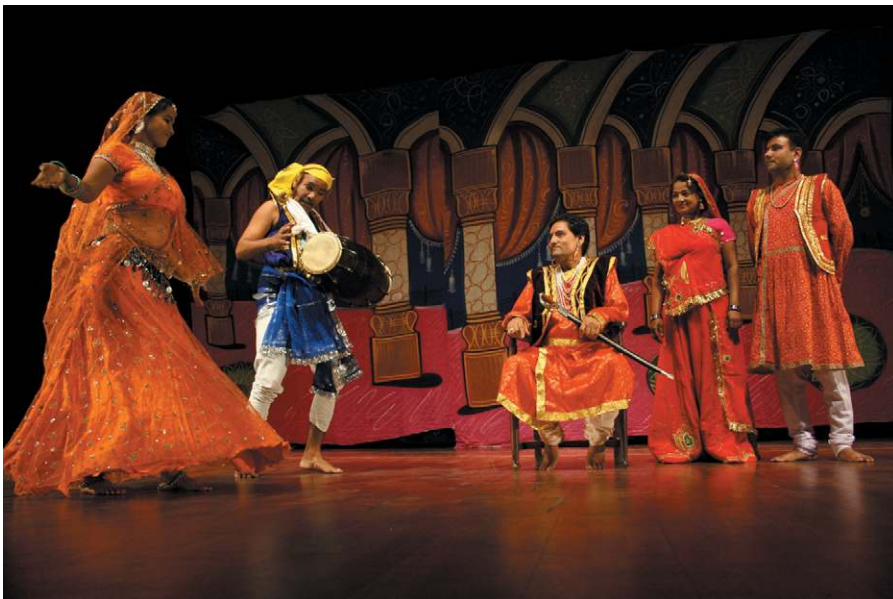


FIGURE 1. Pandit Ram Dayal Sharma (center) and Devendra Sharma (far right) perform in the Nautanki *The Abduction of Indal*, 2015. (Photo courtesy of the author)

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: I have many years of experience in Nautanki and Ramlila. Starting in my early teenage years (in the late 1950s), I used to travel hundreds of miles, from the Mathura area (where I am from) to the city of Kanpur and other places in central Uttar Pradesh, performing Nautanki with my father and uncle in our family's troupe. We would tour towns and villages alike, and people would hire us to perform on special occasions, such as festivals and weddings. Sometimes we would stay in the same village for multiple nights, performing different Nautankis/Swangs each night.<sup>1</sup> Our troupe was one of the most successful and sought-after professional Nautanki troupes.

We would go from one village to another, performing continuously throughout the wedding season (in parts of summer, late fall, and winter) and during festivals like Bharat Milap.<sup>2</sup> We would also perform shows free-of-charge for charity, for example, to raise funds for a new school, as we were so popular. We would perform the whole night and then go on to the next village, traveling by bullock cart. The luggage would be loaded on the carts with us. There were no proper roads then, only unpaved mud paths, so when the wind blew, we would get totally covered in sand. After a long, arduous journey, we would finally reach the next village. Usually we would arrive at dusk. Then we would rush to eat our dinner if there was time. Otherwise, if we got the chance, we would run backstage between scenes, eat, and then rush back on stage, while the show was going on. But sometimes there was not time, so we just kept performing and went hungry all through the night. Traveling Ramlila troupes also went through similar hardships.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: How would you describe the relationship between Ramlila and Nautanki?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: There is an older form of Nautanki that is particularly comparable to Ramlila. It is called Bhagat or "devotional Nautanki." In both Bhagat and Ramlila, there are narrators who sing and direct (*kavi* in Bhagat and *vyās* in Ramlila). In the old days, they would perform with the actors and singers in open spaces, with the audience gathered around them on all sides. There would be—and even now in some places there still are—open spaces with permanent stages or temporarily installed platforms on which they would perform. Often, they would perform in wide streets between rows of houses and buildings, or in the courtyards of schools and temples. Sometimes this still happens. Traditionally in Ramlila, the *vyās* sings a few *caupāis* (couplets in a specific meter) from Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, and then the actors and *svanāps*—Ram, Lakshman,

and so forth—act out its meaning, speaking prose dialogues on platforms. Then the *vyās* completes the episode or scene by singing more *caupāis* and/or *dohās* (shorter couplets in a different meter)—especially *dohās* because they give a sense of completion.

It's still often done like this nowadays, but mostly on outdoor proscenium-style stages with more modern stage conventions. However, in the villages of Braj, there are still places where Ramlila performances are done on temporary platforms surrounded by the audience. There was a similar style of performance in Bhagat. Performances in Bhagat are traditionally arranged by *akhāṛās*, all-male neighborhood groups with a system of *ustāds* (“gurus” in Urdu) and disciples. Each *akhāṛā* was led by its own *ustād*. *Akhāṛās* were amateur, but highly skilled teams that performed in their own neighborhoods. They also sometimes hired star performers and professional troupes from outside the community to perform in their neighborhood.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: How would *akhāṛās* arrange performances in their localities?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: The *ustād* and his disciples would first compose the script for a Bhagat. After the script was prepared, local businessmen and other wealthy people in the neighborhood would take responsibility for getting the Bhagat staged. People from the *akhāṛā* would go out and collect donations from all the people in the neighborhood. The same thing still happens in Ramlila—neighborhood residents sponsor the performance. Once all the money was collected, appropriate actors were selected as per the demands of the script. Local actor-singers would be invited to participate, and then a casting workshop and rehearsals were held over many days, and sometimes even for an entire month or more. Rehearsals would continue day after day. Hundreds of people would come just to watch the casting workshop and rehearsals, as they were conducted with great discipline. There are also long rehearsals in Ramlila, even today, but Ramlila differs from Bhagat on this point: Ramlilas don't have public rehearsals. Only organizers, performers, and people connected to them are present during their rehearsals. However, the ambience of practice sessions in Ramlila and Bhagat is very similar. Everyone has a lot fun at Nautanki and Ramlila rehearsals.

Around Mathura and Vrindavan where I lived, the actor-singers in Nautanki and Bhagat would be fed and taken care of very well by the local *akhāṛā* people, some of whom performed themselves. Top performers were fed so much, they would get overwhelmed by all the wonderful hospitality. Everyone was served generous amounts

of ghee, milk, butter, cashews, almonds, and other delicacies, so they would have enough strength for rehearsals and performances that required much powerful singing. It was like that in Ramlila too. There are still some *akhāyās* based in Mathura and Vrindavan which follow the same performance process and traditions. However, Nautanki and Bhagat performances are now few and far between, due to a lack of resources and patronage.

Ramlilas usually start at least ten days before Dussehra. But in Bhagat, the timing and length of performances are not fixed. Bhagat performances can be anywhere from one to five nights, and can occur any time of the year, except during “*khal mās*” (the “inauspicious month” in the Hindu calendar, when the gods sleep), when no auspicious events can take place. I myself have participated in Bhagats that lasted multiple nights. Such long Bhagats are rare today, but one-night Bhagats are still being staged even now.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: What kind of affiliations have you had with Ramlilas in the Braj region and in Delhi?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: I have been invited as a *kathākar* (narrator) and *vyās* at Ramlilas in Mathura, Vrindavan, and other locations in the Braj region. In my childhood in Braj, I performed as a *svanīp* in Ramlila which is very popular in Braj, and in Ramlila. In Delhi, I have served as the *vyās* at the Ramlilas of Ashok Vihar and Shalimar Bagh. In the 1980s, I also wrote a new script for one of the biggest and oldest Ramlilas in Delhi, the one currently performed at Ramlila Maidan.<sup>3</sup>

DEVENDRA SHARMA: What role does the Radheshyam Ramayan have in Ramlila, and did you consult it while working on the script for the performance at Ramlila Maidan in Old Delhi?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: The Radheshyam Ramayan was written in the Parsi theater style. It became so popular that most Ramlilas started using it in their scripts, as well as imitating the staging style of the Parsi theatre. The Radheshyam Ramayan’s dialogues and lyrical poetry made Ramlila performances very powerful and effective. Pandit Radheshyam’s dialogues have all the *rasas*: *vīr* (heroism), *karuṇā* (compassion), and so forth. In many Ramlilas that I have performed in—in cities, towns, and villages—most of the dialogues were taken from the Radheshyam Ramayan, particularly for scenes that needed a lot of energy. Before the Radheshyam Ramayan and Parsi theatre became popular, Ramlilas were generally based on the *caupāis* of the *Rāmcaritmānas*. The *vyās* would just sing verses from the *Rāmcaritmānas*, with limited acting and speaking by performers. That is the old way of doing Ramlila. However, after the Radheshyam Ramayan and the Parsi theatre became popular, Ramlila organizers started adding more spoken verse and prose dialogues in Hindi to

go along with the *caupāṭis*. This is the new way of doing Ramlila. It was well-established by the second half of the twentieth century, in part, because of the influence of the Radheshyam Ramayan.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: Could you say a few words about how commercialization has crept into Ramlila and Nautanki?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: There are many similarities between these two forms. Commercialization is one of them. Both Nautanki (particularly the less religious variety) and Ramlila have become quite commercialized. In Nautanki, we travel out of town a lot to do commercial shows. It wasn't the case with amateur neighborhood *akhāṛās*, but professional Nautanki troupes have always been hired on a contractual basis, with their itineraries and fees fixed in advance. The repertoires of Nautanki troupes are naturally more varied than those of Ramlila troupes, and Nautankis can be performed all year round, not just at the time of Dussehra, which is generally when Ramlilas are performed.

Professional touring companies have been performing Ramlila (and Raslila) for at least 150 years. Professional Nautanki companies came later, around the second decade of the twentieth century. But they often mixed up styles, such that the same troupe would perform different styles in turn, at the same engagement. In fact, troupes in my *gharānā*, including my own troupe, would often perform Raslila, and sometimes Ramlila too, in addition to Nautanki, and my father told me that they used to do this even before his generation. Sometimes this still happens. However, in those days, Ramlilas were not overly commercialized. In the past, Ramlila troupes would just arrive in a village, many times unbeknownst to the villagers. When they turned up in a village, different families of the village would take turns providing them with hospitality, including food and lodging. And then at night, the troupe would perform Ramlila in return for this hospitality. Sometimes villagers had no money to give. They themselves had none to spare. These troupes also performed Ramlila at times other than Dussehra. That used to be more common. These days Ramlila troupes are contractually hired in advance for negotiated sums of money, for the fall Ramlila season.

Nautanki has actually become much more commercial than Ramlila. The Parsi theatre played a role in this; it was commercial from its very beginnings. Nautanki slowly followed the same path. In the 1930s, many Nautanki troupes started using painted backdrops and costumes like those in the Parsi theatre. This especially happened at Nautanki performances in Kanpur and Lucknow. Around the same time, the name "Nautanki" started replacing





FIGURE 2. Pandit Ram Dayal Sharma (left) performs in the Nautanki *Amar Singh Rathore*, circa 2008. (Photo courtesy of the author)

the older name, Swang for less overtly religious Nautanki performances. In traditional Bhagat, once you do a show with a particular script, you don't repeat it. Each show is unique. Also, Bhagat's goal is to cultivate *bhakti* (religious devotion), from which it gets its name. ("Bhagat" means "related to God" or "devotee.") Making money is not a priority. In fact, Bhagat does not make money. On the contrary, community members donate money to make it happen, at cost. No tickets are sold for entry to a Bhagat performance. This has prevented Bhagat from becoming commercial. I have performed in many Bhagats and have also written Bhagats like *Sundar kathā* (The Beautiful Story, 2008), which is based on the "Sundar kāṇḍ" (The Beautiful Event) in the *Rāmcaritmānas*. However, in commercial Nautanki, one script can be written and then used in hundreds of shows, generating a lot of money.

At one point in the mid-1900s, there was a huge number of Nautanki troupes that did ticketed shows. In fact, ticketed Nautanki performances were very popular, much like cinema is today and the Parsi theatre was in the past. Such commercial Nautanki shows were called "ticket-line" Nautankis. I spent a large part of my life



performing in ticket-line Nautankis. There was an entirely a different ambience in Nautanki then. There was very much a “star culture.” People used to buy tickets just to see big-star performers like me. And organizers used to do a great deal of publicity, telling people, “Such and such a big star is going to be performing in our show, so please come and watch!” And then people would rush to the ticket windows to buy tickets! In fact, many times crowds would cause so much chaos at the ticket windows, they had to face the policemen’s batons, while the police tried to maintain order. Yet people were still willing to face such hurdles in their enthusiasm to buy tickets.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: Summing up, how would you categorize all of the various styles of Ramlila we see today?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: I would say there are generally three kinds of Ramlilas—first, traditional Ramlilas based on Tulsidas’s *Rāmcaritmānas*, second, popular Ramlilas based partly on the *Rāmcaritmānas* but mostly on the Radheshyam Ramayan or other local scripts (or musical compositions in the case of Kumaon), and third, sophisticated urban Ramlilas that incorporate elements like Indian styles of classical dance, music and singing, and expensive technology—elaborate light and sound systems, etc. Some elite urban Ramlilas are very much like operas, with live singing in classical and semi-classical modes. Examples of such Ramlila productions include those of the Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra and the Parvatiya Kala Kendra, both major cultural institutions in Delhi.<sup>4</sup> In Nautanki too, we have three distinct styles: traditional Bhagats, popular Swangs or Nautankis, and commercial, ticketed Nautankis.

Over time, Ramlila has become more professional and commercial. Some high-budget Ramlilas in cities draw more on elite classical traditions, and some draw more on popular entertainment like TV and film. In fact, the Ramlila organized by the Lav-Kush Ramlila Committee that happens on the grounds of Lal Qila (Red Fort) in Delhi routinely invites big TV and film stars as guests, and sometimes even hires them to perform roles. Such Ramlilas are very glitzy and, naturally, high budget.<sup>5</sup> Some of these urban Ramlilas have actors mime and lip-sync to pre-recorded music and dialogues. Although the vast majority of Ramlilas are not ticketed events, some do charge admission. These things never happened in an earlier period.

DEVENDRA SHARMA: Any final thoughts on Ramlila and Nautanki you would like to share?

RAM DAYAL SHARMA: We can see there are many similarities, and of course some differences, between these two forms. But I would like to add one thing. There used to be a lot more respect for artists working in traditional arts like Nautanki and Ramlila, and the artists themselves used to put in an incredible amount of work into their performances. Remarkably, in the case of *akhāyā*-based Nautanki and amateur Ramlila, all of this work was done by devoted volunteers working in their local communities.

#### NOTES

1. Although Ramlila Maidan dates only to the early 1930s, the Ramlila that transpires here goes back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, and has been staged at various locations in the vicinity of Red Fort over the course of its long history.

2. See Himanshu Joshi's comments about the Partvatiya Kala Kendra in an interview with him, in this issue.

3. As Pandit Sharma explains, Swang is an older name for Nautanki. Although these are the essentially same form, the former term has connotations of the older style of Nautanki that was practiced in the nineteenth century.

4. This festival celebrates "Bhārat milāp," the Ramlila scene depicting the emotional reunion of Bharat and Ram when Ram returns with Lakshman and Sita after defeating Ravan, and completing his forest exile.

5. See Radhica Ganapathy's introduction to her translation of several scenes from the Lav-Kush Ramlila in this issue.